

Christianity's Dirty Words
Sermon #1 – "Religious"
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As you probably know I teach a public speaking class at CLC each semester, and in each class the students are required to give four speeches: a speech on something or someone they value, an informative speech that involves some research, a persuasive speech, and a speech that uses visual aids.

This last speech I used to call a deMONstrative speech, but several of my students made fun of me because they said I was pronouncing it wrong. They said it's actually called a demonSTRATive speech, because they were demonstrating something. I assured them in a very gentle way they were wrong and would fail my class miserably. I told them their problem was they were putting the emPHAsis on the wrong sylLABle.

I think a lot of people are guilty of putting the emPHAsis on the wrong part of a lot of our vocabulary of faith. We take a word or phrase's biblical meaning and we distort it or focus on only one small part of it, thereby changing the meaning of the word and its relevance for us.

Let me give you an example of this that comes right from the Bible. You all have heard of Peter. Peter was a disciple and one of the closest confidantes of Jesus. Although he had his shortcomings, Peter was one of the leaders of the early Christian movement. And yet even he wasn't immune to putting the emPHAsis on the wrong sylLABle.

One day, Jesus was telling the disciples about what was going to happen to him. Jesus said that he must go to Jerusalem and suffering many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests, and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed, and on the third day be raised to life.

Now, if you were listening to Jesus' words, what would catch your ear? I find his whole statement very troubling and compelling, but that part of about being raised to life would jump out at me. But not for Peter. He took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him, saying "Never Lord! We'll never let them kill you." Do you think Peter missed the point? It's like going to the zoo and saying, "I can't see the elephants because that blade of grass is in the way." Peter put the emPHAsis on the wrong sylLABle.

Down through the centuries, biblical words and phrases have been co-opted by the surrounding culture and redefined until they lose their original meaning. That's ironic, because Christians could be accused of doing the same thing. Did you know that we don't really know on what day Jesus was born? Unfortunately, all the computer hard drives from that time period have been erased. According to Laurence Hull Stookey, when the observance of the nativity began to be kept in the fourth century, it was inserted into the calendar at a place where people celebrated what was called "the return of the invincible sun," as the shortest day of the year passed and the days began to lengthen. Christians co-opted this time for their own celebration, and thus we have Christmas on Dec 25, four days after the shortest day of the year, the winter solstice. We took the emphasis off the sun and placed it on the Son. The irony is, of course, you could argue the culture has once again reclaimed Christmas as a secular holiday.

In this dance of sacred and profane Christianity has had with the culture around us, it's time to make some things sacred again. Too many of our words of faith, words

that are essential to our understanding of Christianity, have been given alternative meanings that not only dilute the word of its power, but have also become the prevailing definition over and above the sacred definition. The Roman philosopher Epictetus said, “What concerns me is not the way things are, but rather the way people think things are.” So in this sermon series, I hope we can look at a few of these words and reclaim them for what they are, not what people think they are.

I want to start with a word that carries a lot of baggage with it. That word is “religious” and its other forms, like “religion.” I wonder how many of us, if someone asked us if we were religious, would answer positive? “Are you religious?” “Well, I’m a Christian, and I go to church, but I don’t know if I would call myself that.”

Why not? Webster’s defines “religious” as “pious, devout; scrupulously faithful; conscientious.” I think we’d all like to be thought of in those ways, right? But when we hear the word “religious” used today, it is rarely said in such noble terms.

First of all, I believe that to be labeled as “religious” carries with it some high expectations. I’ve heard non-believers express disappointment in a “religious” person who’s cursed or smoked or cut them off in traffic. To be called “religious” implies that you are perfect, and none of us want to walk around with that kind of responsibility on our shoulders. If you’re religious, you’re not allowed to do anything that could be remotely fun, because, well, you know, “religious” people just don’t do that.

The word “religious” has gained popularity with a lot of faith-based political movements. Terms like “the religious right” and have become a part of our political vocabulary, and are used in that context to describe a group of people with a certain set of beliefs, motives, and behaviors, usually of the more conservative nature. Whether those descriptions are accurate or stereotypes is not for us to solve today, but we can say the word “religious” conjures up such images in political arenas. That may be another reason we balk at being labeled “religious.” I’m a Christian, but I’m not all religious about it.

That’s part of the issue with the word itself: “religious” can mean more than Christian devotion. Abraham Lincoln once said, “When I do good, I feel good. When I do bad, I feel bad. That’s my religion.” The word has come to mean faithfulness to anything. “I work out religiously.” “I root for my sports team religiously.” Can an atheist be religious in his unbelief? Of course. To do something religiously can have nothing to do with faith.

And that’s where we can get into trouble, because those two words – faith and religion – are often used synonymously. Let me give you an example. Last year I had a minor surgical procedure done, and during the pre-op visit the doctor asked me what I did for a living. When I told him, he hemmed and hawed a bit and said that he and his wife didn’t attend church, but they tried to do a lot of good things for people. Then he said, “That’s a kind of faith, isn’t it?” And I wanted to say, No!” but I didn’t want to contradict a man who would soon be holding a scalpel.

Religion and faith aren’t the same things. Religion, as I understand it, is the human attempt to organize around a common set of beliefs about a higher power. Religion is how we humans come together to make sense of our faith. Religion, while based on divine principles, is a human construct, and therefore will always be imperfect. What my doctor and his wife had created in their minds was the belief that doing good things was equal to having faith. But it had nothing to do with faith, which Webster

defines as “confidence or trust in a person or thing,” in our case, in God as revealed through Jesus Christ.

Our religion is an extension of our faith. We try to live religiously – devoutly, piously – because of our faith. That’s the foundation of why we do everything we do as Christians: not because we think we should or because we want to make ourselves feel better, but because we are responding to what we believe about Jesus Christ and what he’s done for us.

Listen again to how James defines it: “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” To be religious is to live out our faith in Christ. As The Message translates Jesus’ words from Matthew, “Knowing the correct password – saying ‘Master, Master,’ for instance – isn’t going to get you anywhere with me. What is required is serious obedience – doing what my father wills.”

And that’s the challenge: living out our faith by doing what God wills. Someone defined a religious person as someone who is committed to Jesus Christ and then spends their whole life trying to figure out how to do that. I’ve heard trying to live a life of faith compared with trying to simultaneously build a boat and sail it. I don’t know about you, but my faith has sure sprung a few leaks over the years. And yet, despite my faith’s bobbing and listing, I’m still religious in my belief. As preacher Barbara Brown Taylor says, “I have faith. I lose faith. I find faith again, or faith finds me, but through it all I’m grasped by the possibility that it is all true: I am in good hands; love girds the universe; God will have the last word.”

Being religious from a biblical perspective is believing that God has the last word in your life, then living like you believe it. That may be a challenge, but it’s nothing to be ashamed of. May we all continue to be religious in our devotion to God as we live as Christ has called us to live.